

"Hmong Americans in Northern California fight wildfire — and distrust
Wary of local authorities, a community forms an ad-hoc firefighting force to defend its property."
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Image credit: Salgu Wissmath / High Country News
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In late June, lightning struck the western slope of Mount Shasta, a volcano in Northern California, igniting the Lava Fire. Four days later, gusting winds sent flames billowing towards the unincorporated community of Shasta Vista, where over 3,000 residents, predominantly Hmong Americans, live.

One resident, Neng Thong, who bought property there a year earlier, joined with 30 others to form a firefighting force. The community saw no choice; people no longer trusted the county or state to protect them. A seven-year crackdown on cannabis farming had eroded what little trust existed between the Hmong American community and county leaders. Thong believed the county would simply use the fire as an opportunity to clear the area. Others thought the county would implicitly approve the destruction of their property. Recently, vigilantes who'd fulminated against the subdivision on the sheriff's Facebook page openly mentioned arson, with one user wondering whether it would be legal to start a fire. Sheriff Jeremiah LaRue, in a recent interview, brushed off the exchange, saying that the vitriol is "just kind of the way Facebook is."

"They announced that they're going to burn our town down," Thong told me a month later, showing me a screenshot of the comment. "We wanted to save our property. If we hadn't stayed, the entire area would've burned."

On the day of the fire, flames hurtled downhill as the group assembled water trucks along the edge of the subdivision, forming an ad hoc defense. Ill-equipped and putting their lives on the line, they planned to communicate via cellphone and dispatch trucks to vulnerable areas. "We did not believe they were going to come and rescue us or put out the fire," said Zeng Lee, who ran a water truck as he fought the fire alongside Thong. "That's why I decided to stay."

Sheriff LaRue, aware of the residents' distrust, worried that they wouldn't evacuate. He sent officers to spread a mandatory evacuation order. Sgt. Cory Persing confronted Thong that Monday, stepping out of his patrol car as dust and smoke whipped by, according to video footage obtained by High Country News. "This is a mandatory evacuation," Persing said. "Is there anything in there worth dying for?"

"We know," Thong said as Persing approached. There were flames on the horizon, and others had already left with their water trucks, fearing arrest. "When the wind shifts on us and it comes through here," Persing said, "you're not going to be able to survive it." Thong held his phone to his chest, filming.

For four long days, Thong and Lee fought the fire with roughly a dozen others. They couldn't protect everything; according to the Siskiyou Community Development department, nearly 10% of the subdivision burned. According to eyewitnesses interviewed by HCN as well as affidavits filed in court, firefighters from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire, were slow to respond. LaRue maintains that engines tried to enter the subdivision but were delayed because Shasta Vista residents blocked the roads with their cars. Later, Thong and the others learned that one resident, Soobleej Kaub Hawj, was shot and killed by four law enforcement officers as he tried to evacuate. According to the Siskiyou County Sheriff's Office, Hawj brandished a gun while trying to bypass a roadblock.

Thong and the others didn't believe that Persing was there to help them; they thought he was there to prevent them from protecting their property. "We did not block the road," Thong told me, retracing his steps that day. "We have never done anything to them. Nothing at all." At press time, despite numerous interview requests and a public records request, HCN had yet to receive any comment from Cal Fire.

All this tension speaks to a dynamic that goes back years. With few friends in public office and a sense that county officials and community members regard them as organized criminals, the Hmong Americans harbor a deep suspicion of the sheriff's office and the Siskiyou County Board of Supervisors.

AROUND 2015, Hmong Americans started moving to Siskiyou County, according to a 2019 study by researchers Margiana Petersen-Rockney and Michael Polson for the Cannabis Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley. In the 1960s, the Hmong were recruited to fight during the CIA's "Secret War" in Laos; the vanguard of many Mien, Cambodian, Laotian, Chinese and other ethnic Americans and migrants, many of the early Shasta Vista arrivals were older refugees who originally immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1970s, following the Vietnam War. As they aged, some retired from cities to the countryside. The Shasta Vista subdivision seemed ideal: cheap, contiguous plots available for close-knit friends and family, where they could plant subsistence gardens, raise animals and grow cannabis.

Some started farming at a commercial scale and became the immediate focus of local politics: To the majority-white county, cannabis, and its cultivators, signified a visible, rapid economic and demographic shift, Petersen-Rockney said. 2017 estimates from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Siskiyou Sheriff's Office show twice as many cannabis farmers as non-cannabis farmer. Now, thousands of greenhouses dot the valley.

Early on, the sheriff's office tied the cannabis "problem" — according to former Sheriff Jon Lopey — to the subdivision, denouncing it as a threat to "our quality of life and the health and safety of our children and grandchildren." Others voiced their concern at town halls, and this spring a county supervisor called the industry a "virus." LaRue, over the phone, condemned the crime and profit-seeking, noting he'd heard the farms described using terms like invasion, virus or cancer. "For me," he said, "this issue is mainly about greed."

The Siskiyou County Board of Supervisors, which is responsible for local cannabis regulation, began criminalizing commercial activity in 2015. In 2017, it declared a state of emergency and passed a moratorium on commercial cannabis activities, both medical and recreational. Nearly all the Shasta Vista farmers found themselves in immediate non-compliance.

Since farming cannabis commercially remains a criminal act, unregulated infrastructure proliferates. Generators have caused carbon monoxide poisoning, and unlined septic systems threaten public health. “It’s very detrimental environmentally,” Rick Dean, director of Siskiyou County’s Community Development Department, told me over the phone in July.

Nearby ranchers supplied water to the growers until the county banned such transactions in May — a policy that was contested in a civil rights lawsuit and recently blocked. According to the sheriff’s office, delivering goods and services to the area, including water, was considered “aiding and abetting” illegal activity.

Shasta Vista residents feel like they’re being forced out. Thong, for example, sees himself as pursuing an American ideal. “In the old days, everybody bought lands for a couple dollars,” he told me. Many landowners invested in livestock, Thong said, so why would the county think his family was only there to grow cannabis? “We are poor, so we have to start somewhere,” he said. “It’s land, you know.”

Compliance with the ordinance has been an issue; in an interview this summer, Dean said that just 5% of the Shasta Vista lots were obeying it. “When we have such a large scale of people ignoring basic laws, we need to figure out how to enforce it somehow.”

That’s how the sheriff’s office became involved, resulting in what Petersen-Rockney, the cannabis researcher, calls a blurring of civic violations and criminal law. “The county created these conditions. From the beginning, no one could comply,” she said. In 2016, the sheriff’s office formed an interagency task force specifically for cannabis, and within a month of its creation, it issued 25 abatement notices and filed 20 criminal charges. Later, the emergency declaration enabled the county to enlist state agencies and expanded the sheriff’s capacity to police the area.

The Hmong American families shouldered the impact of the heavy police presence. Many say they were pulled over in traffic stops — the result, they felt, of racial profiling. The conflict continues to create political polarization. Recently, LaRue recruited “volunteers” from a so-called “Patriots’ group” to bulldoze cannabis farms. Congressman Doug LaMalfa, R-Calif., before driving a tractor into a greenhouse, proclaimed, “I love the smell of diesel power in the afternoon. It smells like victory,” a direct reference to the 1979 Vietnam War movie *Apocalypse Now*. State of Jefferson Outdoors, a hunting outfitting company, later sold T-shirts emblazoned with a tractor and the slogan: “Bulldozers and Badges ... Support our Sheriff.”

Today, the conflict remains in a damaging feedback loop: The more the ordinance is enforced, the bigger the problem appears, even though little is being done to address noncompliance, environmental concerns and public health. Hekia Bodwitch, a postdoctoral researcher in environmental policy and community development at UC Berkeley, said the situation was counterproductive. “Actually, bringing people into compliance and making compliance easier for people will probably have better outcomes.”

Za Xiao Moua, an elder who has advocated for Hmong American veterans in the United States for years, bought property in Shasta Vista in 2017. His family runs a small farm with goats, ducks and a single cow outside the subdivision. Moua echoes the frustration with the current impasse. “We are not here to do anything to damage the community,” he said. “We wish we can get engaged in the community and better understand each other — make this a better place to live. We need the entire community to understand who we are. We are good people. We can enjoy our freedom here.”